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Kadhim, Abbas

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School



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Painful Archeology: Excavating Saddam's Mass Graves

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 3 (March 2006)

by [Abbas Kadhim](#)^[1]

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Introduction

In post-Saddam Iraq, hardly anything above the ground is interesting. Anything of value was looted, burned or devastated by a stampede of imprudent tools of destruction. Conversely, treasure diggers of every kind can always count on some discovery. There are sacred tombs for the pious, artifacts for archeological thieves, weapons for terrorists, and oil for capitalists.

However, for millions of Iraqis, the most precious treasures are the remains of their loved ones in a plethora of mass graves scattered all over the country. Widows, mothers, fathers and orphans march to the newly discovered burial sites as soon as news break that yet another mass grave is unearthed. The scene is always the same: piles of bones divided in a manner defying the basics of human anatomy. Some piles contain extra ribs but missing other parts, or a skeleton of an adult with a skull of an adolescent, all wrapped in a manner below the dignity of the suffering the victim endured or the agony of waiting the survivors had to bear. Every skull has a hole in the back, the entry of a bullet fired at a close range, and the skeletal wrists still kept the robes that tied them prior to their fateful moments. This was how the earth inherited the poor. Identification of remains is often based on such clues as the victim's decomposed documents or what the earth spared of the clothes or a watch, not DNA or lab tests. People in search for closure for many years often settled for the pile of bones that best resembled their missing loved one. For those unfortunate mourners, mere resemblance was taken as positive identification.

While mass graves were part of the Iraqi political scene for many decades, the largest and most numerous ones belonged to months of uprising in 1991, following the war to expel Saddam from Kuwait. Tens of thousands of men, women and children in the Iraqi south were murdered or taken to unknown locations, never to be seen again. Their surviving families convinced themselves that they were taken into custody and that they will be released some day. Twelve years later, when the regime was overthrown, the reality hit home. Tens of thousands of completely innocent people simply vanished.

The war over Kuwait ended by a unilateral U.S. timing—8:00 a.m. on February 28, 1991. In the following day, a spontaneous uprising erupted in the southern city of Basra and in the marshlands the next day. The fervor of revolt moved on to encompass all the provinces in the south and center of Iraq. The revolutionaries captured all the areas south of Baghdad: Basra, Misan, Dhi

Qar, Diwaniyya, Najaf, Karbala, Babil, Wasit and Muthanna. The Kurds also captured their own territories in the north, leaving Saddam with Baghdad and four other provinces. The revolutionaries took the advantage of the chaos that was caused by the war and the devastation of the Iraqi army and the government. They were also encouraged by the words of President George H. W. Bush urging Iraqis to “take matters in their own hands,” which they interpreted to mean that the United States would help should they do that. After the conclusion of the ceasefire agreements, Iraqi southerners were left for Saddam to do with them as he pleased, and so he did.

The victims of Iraq’s mass graves were used posthumously by many people to advance political causes alien to the reasons for which they sacrificed. American politicians who were serving in the Bush administration in 1991 returned a decade later condemning Saddam for “murdering his own people,” conveniently leaving out the simple details pertaining to their own choice to look the other way as Saddam committed these acts of genocide while they were in a perfect position to stop him. Iraqi politicians in exile also opportunistically used the mass graves to further their own causes. They too selectively forgot the inconvenient detail that while the uprising was taking place they failed to agree on a place to meet, much less to agree on how to help their fellow Iraqis inside. None of them set foot in the liberated places in the south. It is a travesty that the mass graves are still the bloody shirt for most politicians in Iraq while the families of those victims are still living in sub-human conditions which are perhaps no better than their conditions when Saddam was in power.

It remains to be seen if Saddam will be held accountable for these crimes. What is certain is that most of the victims will remain nameless and faceless throughout the upcoming years. The trial of Saddam cannot possibly involve every individual tragedy. But this must not mean that they will not have a place in our memory. Those who forget their fallen heroes cannot be worthy of their sacrifice.

The following testimony describes the last days of April 1991, when the uprising in Najaf and its sister city, Kufa, was reaching its end. The narrator, Dr. Hasan Nadhim, describes his own experience in those difficult days. It is one of the millions of testimonies, which are not on the calendar of any court. In honor of the memory of Haydar and his father, I present the following translation to those who care to read and reflect on the evil of that era. As those events were taking place, I was making my way to the south of Iraq, and from there to exile. The narrator was the last person I saw in Kufa. He declined the proposal to join me on the journey—perhaps unaware of what he was about to experience. Here is his story:

The Slim Chance of Life: Escaping a Mass Grave

by Hasan Nadhim^[2]

Translated by: Abbas Kadhim

In Kufa, in its countryside—the countryside of Al Isa on the [eastern] bank of the Euphrates—in April of the year of the uprising 1991, I came to know the slim chance of life following an almost certain death in the midst of an asymmetrical battle between one of armored brigades of the “Iraqi army” and a few armed men who came from Samawa to support Najaf and Kufa as they were about to fall in the hands of the army. Most people evacuated their homes, leaving the two cities like ghost towns. People went to the countryside; each resident took refuge in his tribe, where many events took place. My family chose to spend that difficult time at the house of my uncle, Mukhif, close to the guesthouse of the Shaykh Wahid al-Haj Abboud in the village of Al Isa. We encountered many families that left the city and found refuge in this beautiful countryside. Date palm trees stood everywhere and the Euphrates as always never cared for anything other than its serene flow. The place sounded safe, but only for a while. It seemed safe as compared with Kufa, which was turned into rubble by random bombardment.

Those who continued to fight to the end were a few men in the Grand Mosque of Kufa and a few others on its bridge. I saw them, both fearful and moving rapidly to their death at once. But the reputation of Najaf as a sacred religious center and the center for the uprising where the religious authority resided—although the clergy had not led the uprising, nor did they intend to as the people remained all the time waiting for decree of *jihad* from [Ayatullah Abu al-Qasim] al-Khoei, which he never issued—this reputation of Najaf brought to it and to Kufa (both are considered as one city) many ordeals. The “Iraqi army” continued to bombard the twin cities for almost a full week before marching through them. They were attacked by missiles (including scud missiles) and bombs. The rationale for this harsh treatment of these two cities in particular called for many explanations. It was said, and this was the theory of all people, that the harshness was to attack the religious symbols in order to quench the angry hearts. It was also thought that the government, highly in disarray, was full of fear and illusion vis-à-vis the numbers of the revolutionaries and their power. Both explanations are plausible. Be that as it may, the city [of Kufa], as I saw it, was completely destroyed after that week of bombardment.

In the middle of that week of bombing, as the army was moving in a deadly sluggishness, two problems struck us. The first concerned my wounded brother, Haydar. We left him behind us in the “Saddam Hospital”—as it was formerly known and now it is al-Sadr Hospital. Haydar was shot in his right leg during the uprising. The bullet left him with a wide wound and a shattered bone. The second problem pertained to my uncle, Abu Hamza, and his wife. We left them in the Mosque of Kufa after we failed to convince him [i.e. Abu Hamza] to take refuge in the countryside instead of the Mosque.

I managed to borrow a car and five liters of fuel, then went from the countryside to Kufa. The road was somehow safe because the army was not very close yet, but the sight of the streets warned of danger. The streets were empty and all feelings were reduced to one: fear. I remember no other feelings. When I came close to the hospital I saw four tanks about half a kilometer behind it. People’s voices were mixed with the moaning of the wounded. The wards were closed and the first floor was in chaos. What happened? Two shells hit the third floor of the hospital forcing the wounded to move down to the ground floor with their portable beds. I searched all over the place for Haydar. Many minutes passed by while I was searching—with four tanks in the back of my mind. I was told that some of the wounded were placed in the kitchen because of the limited space. The kitchen was really large. I found Haydar in one corner of the kitchen. I hugged him and he cried as he wrapped his hands around my neck. The sounds of religious chants were on the rise and the people’s pushing and shoving of one another was at its highest. I put [Haydar] in the car swiftly and pressed on the gas pedal as far as I possibly could. I saw the four tanks but felt safe. The story of the hospital became known afterwards: the army forced its way inside and executed all the wounded; those who could not flee. They were all murdered on their portable beds and a mass grave was prepared for them by the front gate of the hospital where they were buried.

My uncle, Abu Hamza, and his wife, on the other hand, were in possession of positive faith that the evil surrounding the Mosque of Kufa and the adjacent golden dome of Muslim b. Aqil would return to the evil-doers, that the bombs would not explode, that [Imam] Ali b. Abi Talib would defend Najaf and that Imam Husayn would defeat the oppressors. After a few days, Abu Hamza arrived in the village of Al Isa, his face spelling disaster. He showed us his head wear (‘iqal), which was ripped by shrapnel. He said that they bombed the Mosque of Kufa; one bomb fell on those who took refuge at the shrine of Muslim b. Aqil. It did explode. He said that many people died, including his wife, my aunt Um Hamza. He said that he and the other survivors fled in all directions leaving behind the bodies of their loved ones. The women raised their voices in weeping and many relatives rebuked him for staying there and for leaving his wife’s decapitated body. But before a long time everyone concluded that she was the martyr of the Mosque and the shrine of Muslim b. Aqil, and that God will double her reward. They said that she is not better than the body of Imam Husayn that was left naked on the sands of Karbala. All have concluded that

she died the best kind of death and that God does not grant such blood-spattered deaths to anyone, except a few elect from among His servants.

After the conclusion of a Karbala-like scene in Kufa, the "Iraqi army" dug a small mass grave for the bodies of those killed in the Mosque of Kufa and inside the shrine of Muslim b. Aqil. This mass grave was dug in a little public square in front of the Mosque, near the tomb of Khadija the daughter of Ali b. Abi Talib. After some time, Abu Hamza and his sons were able to find the body of his wife and gave it a decent burial after the government permitted the exhuming of the mass grave.

In that period, following the massive destruction, people dared to question the leadership of [the top clergyman, Ayatullah] al-Khoei and cursed him while others followed their emotions and even wished for Saddam's control over the affairs [of the country]. People's faith in some religious tenets was badly shaken because they saw with their own eyes the destruction of God's houses and black holes in the golden domes [of the shrines]. The anger imposed a temporary situation that was bound to end—the kind of a situation that brings people to their most primitive human condition.

After a few days of apprehension in the countryside, an armored brigade belonging to the "Iraqi army" came to the western side of the Euphrates. We were near the guesthouse on the eastern side, near the Euphrates, when suddenly a truck loaded with armed men and weapons appeared. It was coming from Samawa. Young men took off and I saw among them an old man whose hair and beard were invaded by white hairs. They spread quickly in the place, in the farms and the vineyards and at the shoulders of the little river. They told us that they came from Samawa to defend Najaf, asking us to evacuate the area and move to a safe place because the "Iraqi army" took its positions on the other side. Chaos overwhelmed the homes and people were moving in all directions. The cars moved carrying men, women and children and we thought that we had enough time to depart. No one was left except for me, my father and two brothers Haydar and Aziz. We carried Haydar and moved away, slowly. We slipped among the houses and crossed the paved road, which is the extension of the bridge, and arrived at the other side near the stagnant creek. We walked along the creek for a few meters; Haydar was leaning against one of us and walking slowly dragging his wrapped leg, with an opening in the bandage to treat the wound. In the open area there were several houses close to the other side of the road. The fighters took their positions everywhere.

In the midst of the false calm, when there was no one but us, a stream of bullets rained on us from all directions. A bullet touched the collar of my jacket, immediately behind the neck, pushing me to the left. I dragged Haydar to the stagnant creek and we both ran in the midst of bullets. We jumped into the creek but it was not deep enough to protect us against the rain of bullets. We stretched on our backs in the water, which covered our bodies, except for the faces. Haydar's wounded leg was covered with dirty water. The snipers continued to fire at our spot in the creek and we saw only the black holes made by the bullets in the mud at the side of the creek. We crawled slowly away from the bank of the creek to avoid this battlefield, but as we moved away the dirty water became deeper and deeper. We were surrounded again by deep silence after we passed no more than a hundred meters.

We saw a fighter taking his firing position at the edge of the creek. He said it is better for us to return and go against the flow of the creek. "Go in the direction of the army because it is safer for you. This is the area where the firing is ending," he said. He wanted for us to avoid the bullets by moving us toward the Euphrates and the army. He said, "This way you will avoid the bombing too." We asked: "What bombing are you talking about?" He said: "They will bomb the place after this coming through the area." His statement sounded reasonable and it revealed that he had some experience in such situations. But who would have the ability to follow his orders?! We followed our fear and said to ourselves that moving away from death can best be achieved by moving away from its sources. We continued our refuge between the mud and the water. All the

sudden, a massive explosion roared close to us and the fragments of the bomb fell in the mud—the bombardment by mortars began indeed. The bombs that fell away from us were throwing their fragments on us and I could see the holes they left in the mud at the side of the creek as before—the holes left by the fragments which were made cold by the mud. While we only received the smell of gun-powder and the shaking of the ground from the bombs that fell close to us. One bomb fell about two meters away from us leaving a large hole and scattering mud and water all over the place. The mud was hot; it was very warm from the bomb. [My brother] Aziz shouted at us recommending that we utter the *shahadah*, [a statement people make when death becomes imminent]. We did make the three proper statements.

The bombardment continued for more than a heavy hour and with it the night fell and it was as if the creek became wider and its stagnant water increased. As if the creek became a fortified shelter and we felt safety for a moment. The darkness penetrated the fine line between water and the mud, the farms and the open land, the vineyards and the date palms and I said this is the right time to leave the creek and move for a hundred meters of open land then take refuge in the homes of some relatives among the date palms. We agreed on this and resolved on full speed. I dragged Haydar from the creek. His wound, the broken leg, the weight of our wet clothes and the mud here and there, all of that slowed our steps. In the beginning I carried him for thirty meters perhaps then put him down out of exhaustion. I dragged him in fast steps, somehow. There were only fifty meters more before we enter a safe farm that contained the house of Abu lyad—one of our relatives. In that comforting darkness illuminating shots were fired above our heads making the scene clear for the snipers. A new stream of bullets started over us and between our feet. We entered the farm and there was no one in the house other than our relative, Abu lyad, and maybe two others hiding in a shelter made of sand and trunks of date palms from the days of the bombings of the Allied Forces attempting to destroy the bridge. We entered a room and Abu lyad gave us some blankets. We took off our clothes to let them dry and I opened my military service book and began to dry the pages—it was my only document proving my discharge from the army to study for an MA degree. At midnight, a new wave of bombardment began. It seemed to be random and we were preoccupied by our apprehension about the rest of the family and our relatives. We thought that the bombing is directed at them now. From the opening of the door we saw balls of fire hurrying toward the dark horizon. We had no idea about the location of our family and relatives. The bombardment continued for more than two hours followed by some calm and darkness. We remained awaiting some imminent attack, but this had not happened until six in the morning. The attack began on the small villages. We heard heavy shooting and some heavier explosions. We did not dare to observe and suddenly the soldiers rushed into the house pointing their guns at us. They were neat in their appearance and very confident about their control of the situation. Before any questioning we told them that we took refuge in this village. They instructed us to walk before them and we went out, myself, my father and my brother Aziz. One of them, they wore no signs showing their ranks, called on two soldiers to take Haydar to a location unknown to us. Before we left the scene I looked back and saw him leaning against two soldiers.

We walked in the middle of the battlefield, ahead of the soldiers. I saw two fighters thrown on the shoulder of a small creek in the farm close to the house where we stayed. One of the soldiers said, "Whoever buries them will be killed like they were." We walked among the date palms and the soldiers were searching for the rest of the fighters—a few of them persevered until the end. Some hid on a date palm and others in the vineyards. Whoever saw them the night before would have realized that some of them were going to prefer safety and depart in the middle of the night for a safer place. We reached the bridge and they left us in the hands of other people. A few minutes later a massive explosion erupted and the soldiers ran, one of them shouted, "He is there, on the date palm!" Then we heard the sound of many machine guns. They took us in a military vehicle that steered its way toward the bridge. There we learned that the massive explosion was a tank that was blown up—we saw the smoke rising from the tank. The car took us to intersection leading to Hilla and Diwaniyya, near the bridge where we saw more men captured by the "Iraqi army."

We were classified into three categories: old people in one row, students in another row and young people who were not students in a third row, the third had to be deserting soldiers. We were ordered to stand as a square missing one side. My brother Aziz and I were in the row of students and my father was in the row of old men on our right side. On our left was the row of the soldiers—Haydar was not among them. At six in the morning the military vehicles of the armored brigade moved slowly and lined up on the road leading to Diwaniyya. A man wearing a neat military uniform, a little different than other uniforms, stood in front of us. His position indicated that he was the commander of the brigade because everyone saluted him. He had a confident look. I watched him from far away and noticed that his lips were instructing two officers—it seemed. After two hours approximately the two officers returned with a six years old boy. They placed the child in the middle of the square and pretended that they were going to shoot him. One of them said to the other, "Shoot him now, shoot him!" The other replied, "Yes Sir, I am going to shoot him now." He pulled the trigger of the machine gun and shot once at the child's feet. The child was stunned. He was without fear of courage. The first officer then said to the other, "Don't shoot him. He is a good boy and will tell us who used weapons against us and who participated in the check point of Al Isa. The child walked by all the rows and began to examine the faces. We had our document in front of us. I whispered to Aziz to look at his documents and avoid the child's eyes. When he was done examining the faces, he already pointed at three young men, who were immediately blindfolded, their hands were tied and they were thrown on the ground. The two soldiers were not satisfied with this, so they took the child behind a little hill and after a few minutes came back and called for the name of another man. He too was immediately placed with the blindfolded men. We spent all the afternoon sitting and waiting for some destiny. The soldiers brought their *qazans* (large pots for cooking) to prepare the food. At the same time, the canons were situated for another bombardment, people thought it to be al-Shamiyya, [a small town between Najaf and Diwaniyya]. I saw one of our women carrying a large pot full of food and on the top she had a lot of bread. She was moving toward the man I thought to be the commander of the brigade, but the man stopped here at some distance and said, pointing with his stick, "Go back! We may defile your pots with our tails."

The soldiers had their food, as we sat in silence, and they began preparing for another bombing. At five p.m. the commander came to us and stood before us with confidence, but without any condescension or arrogance, and said a few words: "Go to your homes in this village, but if I hear one bullet I will wipe it from the face of the earth." The voices of men erupted asking for God's mercy for his parents and thanking the milk his mother nurtured him with, and asking God to grant him victory over his enemies.

We returned home anxiously talking about Haydar. We found him dropped on his bed. He said that the soldiers were tired of carrying him and took him back. The scene of crying and hugging in the hospital kitchen was repeated one more time.

Now that a history of mass graves, documented by the bones, I can say that my brother Haydar and I escaped a mass grave in front of Saddam's Hospital in Kufa and again we, along with my father and my brother Aziz, escaped a mass grave on the bank of the Euphrates in Kufa. The latter was prevented by the abovementioned commander of the armored brigade, who was confident without condescension or arrogance. I remember him now, not knowing his name, and place him among those who possessed the power and authority to kill people but refrain from doing so, favoring to safeguard their blood. I remember him and place him in contrast to the diggers of mass graves, his colleagues the commanders of other brigades.

When an Iraqi escaped two disasters, he says, "May God shield us against the third." It was not possible for my father and my brother Haydar to escape the third mass grave. In the main market of Kufa, after the dust of battles settled and the fighting was over and the people began pursuing their semi-normal life, it appeared that the state's revenge against the people was not enough and that the destruction did not quench the hateful hearts. A large truck stopped in the market of Kufa and a few men, tough on their own people, began stuffing the truck with any one they found

in the market, including my father and my brother Haydar and our neighbor, a seventy years old man from Basra, and his son. It all happened in the morning. Later in the afternoon, the son of our old Basran neighbor returned to tell us how they all were taken to the headquarters of the Baath Party in Kufa and from there were taken to some place unknown to us until this day. As for him, he returned because fortune saved him. He was chosen to with other young men to clean up the headquarters of the security police in Najaf.

Ever since that day, an April day of bad omen, my father and my brother Haydar, along with thousands of other Iraqis, lie in mass graves yet to be discovered. For the discovery of mass graves is an everlasting event which will never be complete.

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References

1. Abbas Kadhim is a member of NPS faculty. The views expressed in the article are solely the responsibility of the author, and they do not represent the official view of the U.S. Navy, Department of Defense, or U.S. government.
2. Hasan Nadhim is now a citizen of Australia. He holds a Ph.D. in Arabic Literature. He is the author of three books and the translator of eight others in the field of linguistics and critical literary theory.